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ABSTRACT

The present "crisis of leadership" in the United States presidency owes much to a communication environment that undermines the politician's ability to behave like and be perceived as a traditional "great leader." Through constant electronic coverage politicians' freedom to isolate themselves from their audience has been limited, annihilating their "rehearsal stage" for public pronouncements, closing the distance between audience and performer, and costing politicians a great deal of control over their message and image. While old style "great leaders" could hide personal illnesses and problems from the public, by the time of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson such problems became public. Richard Nixon was a victim of publicized contradictions between public and private behaviors, while Jimmy Carter is the first president who has tailored his actions to the high visibility of the office by avoiding the traditional dramatic rhetorical style of the presidency, by playing down his own importance, and by attempting to say nothing which would be contradicted by anything the media could reveal. The twin demands for great powerful leaders and for fully open administrations may well be imcompatible--the familiarity fostered by electronic media all too easily breeds contempt. (DF)

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CARTER AND THE EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL IMAGE

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There has been a lot of concern lately over our "crisis in leadership." The American presidency is in trouble. Lyndon Johnson "abdicated" his office; Richard Nixon left the presidency in disgrace; Gerald Ford failed to be elected. And before the Iranian crisis, Jimmy Carter's popularity ratings hit record lows. Indeed, most observers would agree that Carter's sudden rise in the polls early this year was more the outcome of patriotism for America than enthusiasm for the President.

We seem to be having difficulty finding leaders who have charisma and style and who are also competent and trustworthy. Last month, Newsweek analyzed recent political polls and concluded that: "Perhaps the most telling political finding of all is the high degree of disenchantment voters feel about most of the major candidates."[1] Of course, every horse race has its winner, and no matter how bad a field of candidates emerges, people will always have their favorites. But the news media's obsession with poll percentage points--such as we have been witnessing these last few months--obscures the more fundamental issue of the overall decline in the image of leaders in general.

There are at least two ways to study the image and rhetoric of the presidency. One is to examine the content and form of speeches and actions; in other words, to look at specific strategies, choices, and decisions. Another method is to examine the context within which the President performs his role. This second method requires a shift in focus away from the specific rhetorical strategies of the individual politician and toward the general communication environment that surrounds the presidency, and is therefore shared by all who seek that office.

I would like to use this second method to place Carter's political image in perspective and to shed some light on our leadership problem in general.

I will suggest to you that our "crisis in leadership" may have little to do with a simple lack of potentially good men, and much to do with a specific communication environment: a communication environment which undermines the politician's ability to behave like, and therefore be perceived as, the traditional "great leader."

Before the widespread use of electronic media, the towns and cities of our country served as backstage areas of rehearsal for national political candidates. By the time William Jennings Bryan delivered his powerful "cross of gold" speech at the Democratic convention in 1896, for example, he had already practiced it many times in different parts of the country. Bryan noted in his memoirs how fond he was of the last line about the "crown of thorns" and "crucifying mankind on a cross of gold"--so fond, in fact, that he had used this line a number of times in local speeches and debates and then saved it for a special occasion.[2]

Today, through radio and television, the national politician often faces a single massive audience. Wherever he speaks, he addresses the whole country. To have their full impact, therefore, major speeches can be used only once; and so they tend to be relatively coarse and undramatic. And inspiring phrases either get used up quickly or they become annoying clichés.

Nineteenth century America provided multiple political arenas in which politicians could polish up the form and the substance of their main ideas. But this was not all. The non-electronic environment also allowed politicians to support their central platforms with slightly different promises to each section of the country. Today, because a politician addresses so many different audiences simultaneously, he has great difficulty speaking in specifics.

The impact of electronic media on political performances can be better understood by briefly analyzing the staging requirements for any social role. In a book called The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, sociologist Erving Goffman has described the ways in which the performance of a social role

always involves highlighting certain personal characteristics while concealing others.[3] A restaurant waiter, for example, must often hold back his opinions on patrons' dinner conversations or table manners in order to perform his role properly. In the same way, a doctor must hide periods of doubt and confusion or suppress sexual feelings in order to maintain the confidence and respect of his patients. Both the waiter and the doctor emphasize other characteristics appropriate to the social situation through selected verbal and non-verbal behavior, selected types of dress and structured physical surroundings. A doctor must appear confident and professional, a waiter, efficient and respectful.

Regardless of competence, regardless of desire, there is a limit to how long any person can play out an idealized conception of a social role. The individual must stop to satisfy bodily needs, he must have time to contemplate and analyze his behavior, and he must often play different roles before different "audiences." A man, for example, may be a father, a son, a husband, an old college roommate, and a boss. He may also be President of the United States. Generally, he needs to emphasize different aspects of his personality in order to function effectively in each of these roles. The performance of a social role, then, is indeed a <u>performance</u>; that is, a selected display of behavior that cannot go on forever and which must, to some extent, be planned and rehearsed.

In keeping with the metaphor of drama, Goffman has characterized behavior as falling into two broad categories--"front region" or onstage behavior, and "back region" or backstage behavior. In "front regions" the individual is in the presence of a given audience and he plays out a relatively ideal notion of a social role (doctor in front of his patients, for example, or a teacher in front of his students). In "back regions," however, the individual and those who share his performance relax, discuss strategy, and analyze front region occurrences. For example, when a doctor is <u>not</u> in the presence of his

clients, he may joke with his nurse about the physical appearance of a patient, he may ask his nurse never to correct him within earshot of others (a "stage direction"), or he may call up a colleague to get advice on treating an unusual set of symptoms.

Such backstage behavior may, on the surface, seem more "real" or "honest" or "natural" than front region behavior. Yet the issue is not really that simple. Nearly everyone exhibits contradictory behaviors in different regions. As many of us know, an individual may "really be" a dedicated compassionate teacher even though he complains to his colleagues about workload, contemplates murdering the next student who fights for an extra two points on an exam, or perhaps wonders aloud if he should not have been an advertising executive instead.

Social truth, then, is an elusive quality. One might say that it is a region-relative concept. Behavior in front regions--even though it is "staged"--is still very much a part of our personal and social reality.

Goffman's framework suggests that the performance of any social role depends on controlling access to oneself by segregating regions. The more a person can separate the arenas in which he or she behaves, the more different these behaviors can be. The more a person can maintain a private backstage area--for practice and relaxation, for decision time, for doubts, anxieties, and illnesses--the more dramatic and inspiring the front region performance can be. The need to shield audience members from back region behaviors is especially acute in the performance of roles which rely heavily on mystification and on an aura of greatness, roles such as those performed by our political elite.

Goffman conceives of front and back regions as clearly demarcated physical places and he generally ignores the impact that media may have on the boundaries of social arenas. Yet it seems clear to me that electronic media of communication have been changing the boundary lines between back and front regions. In

presidential politics, for example, the camera eye and the microphone ear have been probing into many aspects of the politician's personal life and behavior and transmitting this information to 200 million Americans. By revealing to its audience both traditionally front region and traditionally back region activities, television could be said to present a new "middle region" view of public figures. We see a politician address a crowd of well-wishers, then greet his wife and his children "in private." We join a candidate as he speaks with his advisors, and we sit behind him as he watches conventions on television.

I call it a "middle region" view because, by definition, the "private" behaviors now exposed are no longer true back region activities, but neither are they merely new front region performances. The necessary distinctions between performance and rehearsal, between front and back regions, have been blurred. Through constant electronic coverage, the politician's freedom to isolate himself from his audience is being limited. In the process, the politician is not only losing aspects of his privacy--a complaint we often hear--but much more importantly he is also simultaneously losing his ability to play many facets of traditional front region roles. When an actor loses his rehearsal space, his performance naturally moves toward the extemporaneous. To be carried off smoothly, the new "middle region" political image requires a synthesis role: behavior that lacks the extreme formality of former front region behavior and also lacks the extreme informality of traditional back region behavior. The new performance remains a performance, but its style is markedly changed.

A significant question to be asked is whether the public or politicians can be satisfied with the image of leaders which is fostered by electronic media. The television camera invades the politician's life like a spy in back regions. It watches him sweat, it sees him anxiously lick his lips or succumb to emotions. The camera destroys all distance between

audience and performer. While the speaker's platform once raised the politician up and away from the people--both literally and symbolically--the camera now brings him close for the people's inspection. And in this sense, it lowers him to their level. Is it any wonder that politicians--such as Ted Kennedy--who try to orate and gesticulate like traditional great leaders, appear high strung, overzealous, or even fanatical on television?

Print journalism once provided an important shield for the politician. News releases in print were impersonal social communications. The politician's personality was well hidden. With electronic journalism, however, the politician loses a great deal of control over his message and image. When he asks that the television camera be turned off, the politician appears to have something to hide. When the television camera is on, the politician cannot distinguish (as he could in print) between on and off the record. That is, he cannot separate his conversation with the press from his conversation with the public. Thus, while politicians try hard to structure the content of the media coverage they receive, the form of the coverage itself is changing the nature of political image. We now have frequent opportunities to watch our leaders trip over words or down stairs.

As late as FDR's presidency, reporters were not allowed to quote the President without permission. Yet even quotations in print rarely reproduce speaking irregularities such as false starts, stammering, hesitation phenomena, or mispronunciations. In a slower print-dominated society, our leaders once had many hours, sometimes even weeks or months, to formulate policy statements and respond to crises. Yet in a television appearance today, a five-second pause for thought can destroy a leader's credibility. And if the country's leader dares to disappear from public view for a few days, people start crying "Where is the President?"

Our leaders were not always so closely examined. Abraham Lincoln had

severe fits of depression, but few people knew of them. Many of our past Presidents had serious physical or psychological problems that were kept secret from the public during their terms of office. Grover Cleveland, for example, had his entire upper left jaw removed in a secret cancer operation. And although he disappeared from the White House for five days (including, incidentally, July 4th!), and although he spoke with bandages in his mouth for some time afterwards, the details of the operation nevertheless remained secret for nearly 25 years.[4] FDR was badly crippled and virtually confined to a wheelchair, yet the public barely realized. On radio, FDR was a powerful, disembodied voice. Even Eisenhower (probably the last President to have control over his back and front regions) could linger near death in a hospital while the country witnessed a flurry of presidential activity through the carefully timed press releases of Press Secretary Hagerty. John Kennedy, however, could not hide his back troubles (here the pun is quite significant) and he had to make a humorous symbol of his rocking chair. And by the time Lyndon Johnson had his gall bladder operation, he felt obliged to smile broadly and reveal his scars to the nation.

Nixon can be seen as the archetypal victim of the new "middle region" politics. President Richard Milhous Nixon tried to play the role of an old-style great leader in blissful ignorance of the communication environment in which he lived. What undid Nixon (and others such as Earl Butz, Wayne Hays, and Wilbur Mills) were blatant inconsistencies between front region image and exposed back region behaviors. Nixon was so certain of his control over access to back regions that he even electronically <u>taped</u> his private conversations while making contradictory statements in public.

On November 2, 1976, Americans elected the first "middle region" President--a man whose actions as a candidate and as President certainly seem tailored to the new political communication environment.

Throughout his campaign, Carter tried extremely hard to say nothing which could be contradicted by anything the media would reveal. His message all over the country was nearly the same. Of necessity, it was not much of a message, but it was consistent and persistent. Basically, he said "just trust me; I'm a good man." Virtually any time he got more specific he drew fire from one sector of the country or another.

Apparently understanding the extent to which he would have to remain in the limelight, Carter chose an act which he himself could follow, again and again. Carter has had to play down his own importance. He emphasizes his reliance on advisors and staff. Even in formal speeches, he uses phrases such as "we'll see" and "I think" and he makes reference to his potential for weakness and mistakes.

Jimmy (not James Earl) Carter has also avoided the traditional dramatic rhetorical style of most former Presidents. He usually speaks quietly and slowly in simple phrases and in a tone and manner suited to the sensitive microphone and close-up lens. (And often therefore not that well suited to physically present audience addressed simultaneously.)

Many of Carter's early actions as President were symbolically appropriate to the new "middle region" politics:

--his informal dress at his "people's inaugural";

--his walk, rather than ride down Pennsylvania Avenue;

--his enrollment of his daughter in public, not private school;

--his informal "fireside chat" and call-in television show;

--his town meetings;

--his drydocking of the presidential yacht;

--his carrying of his own luggage;

The list is very long.

All of these "de-imperializing" actions seem to have been aimed at achieving consistency among all the bits of information that now make up our image of the President. And yet, while Carter has attempted to reshape presidential behavior to suit the high visibility of the office, he has met problems from two sides. First, many people resent his "lowering" of the office and his lack of dynamism and power. At the same time, however, the amount of attention paid to the President seems too great even for Carter's low-key style and "straightforward" approach. Even the Carter presidency has been plagued by petty scandals and numerous problems of "credibility."

Carter's election to the presidency may indeed signify the death of the great autonomous and dynamic leader. Yet his close margin of victory and the mixed response to his low-key style of leadership suggest that the public is still very uneasy with the idea of having only a self-proclaimed "good man" as President. The irony is, however, that the close public scrutiny of the presidency may make it impossible for any man to be good enough for the office.

We hear a call today for two things: fully open administrations and strong powerful leaders. Rarely do we consider that these two demands may unfortunately be incompatible. We want to spy on our leaders, yet we want them to inspire us. We cannot have both disclosure and the mystification necessary for an image of greatness. The post-Watergate fascination with uncovering cover-ups has not been accompanied by a sophisticated notion of what will inevitably be found in the closets of all great men. The familiarity fostered by electronic media all too easily breeds contempt.

Notes

1. March 3, 1980, p. 29.

2. The Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan (1925; rept. Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1971), p. 103.

3. (New York: Anchor, 1959).

4. Allan Nevins, Grover Cleveland: A Study in Courage (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1932), pp. 528-533.

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